

KANSAS

Kansas State Historical Society
Cultural Resources Division

KATHLEEN SEBELIUS, GOVERNOR

CERTIFICATION OF STATE REGISTER LISTING

The Register of Historic Kansas Places includes all Kansas properties nominated to the National Register as well as lower threshold properties which are listed on the state register only.

Property Name: Lillis Gymnasium

Address: 26th Road, one block north of the junction with Bobcat Lane, Lillis, KS

Legal: NE4, SW4, SW4, S15-T5S-R10E, Cleveland Township

County: Marshall

Owner: Lillis Community Center

Address: c/o Linda K. Daniel, 1912 SW Arrowhead, Topeka, KS 66604

National Register eligible _____

State Register eligible X

This property was approved by the Kansas Historic Sites Board of Review for the Register of Historic Kansas Places on August 21, 2004.

I hereby certify that this property is listed on the Register of Historic Kansas Places.

Richard D. Pankratz 8/23/04
Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer Date

9/95

Lillis High School Gymnasium

Marshall County, Kansas

Description

The Lillis High School Gymnasium is located in Cleveland Township in the southeast corner of Marshall County, Kansas. The building is situated on an elevated three-acre parcel of land. The one-story building is constructed of native limestone laid in an ashlar pattern and sits on a concrete foundation. A curvilinear arched steel roof protects the structure. The footprint of the building measures approximately ninety feet north to south and fifty-eight feet east to west. The building is situated with its west-facing front facade running lengthwise, parallel to the street. The simplified design executed in limestone is typical of architecture produced by the Works Progress Administration.

The front facade is centered by a stepped chevron which gives an Art Deco flair to the entrance. This entrance projects forward eight feet from the building to create a vestibule. The vestibule contains a ticket window. The double entrance doors are surmounted by a segmented stone arch with keystone; above this arch is a smooth-faced rectangular stone. The entrance doors are flanked on either side by plaques which commemorate the men from Cleveland Township who served in World War I, and the construction of the building by the Works Progress Administration. To either side of the entrance vestibule, the west-facing facade is punctuated by a ribbon of three windows and a pair of windows, all underscored by smooth stone sills.

The east-facing facade features a pair of windows at the southern-most end, four ribbons of three windows, and a door surmounted by a six-pane transom paired with a single window at the northern-most end. All of the windows are underscored by smooth stone sills.

The south-facing facade is punctuated by a ribbon of three windows, underscored by a smooth stone sill, at either end of the facade. The north-facing facade features a door protected on either side by stepped stone walls which project out slightly from the facade.

The Lillis High School Gymnasium originally contained a basketball court with wooden floors. Wooden bleachers lined the east wall and half of the west wall. A concession stand was located in the northeast corner. A stage flanked by stairs leading to small dressing rooms filled the building's north end. In June 1997, the Lillis High School Gymnasium was devastated by a tornado, which destroyed the roof and many of the windows. The interior's subsequent exposure to the weather irreparably damaged the bleachers, stage, and wooden floor. The original plaster walls have sustained extensive water damage. After the storm, the members of the surrounding community formed the Lillis Community Center, Inc. for the purpose of raising funds to repair the gymnasium. A year after the storm, the roof was replaced. A Lillis native donated replacement windows. A new concrete floor was poured, and the building was rewired, new lighting was installed, and new water lines have been run to the building.

Statement of Significance

The Lillis High School Gymnasium (c. 1938), now known as the Lillis Community Center, is historically significant under Criterion A for its association with the Works Progress Administration (WPA) between 1936 and 1938, and for its role in the Lillis community as a gathering place for events that ranged from theatrical productions to sporting events to wedding dances.

Although Lillis was a relatively new town, chartered on October 29, 1906, and created when the Union Pacific Railroad built a line through the region, the community that existed in the vicinity was not. Irish immigrants had been settling in the area, known as Irish Creek, since the 1860s. In 1871, Reverend Thomas Ambrose Butler wrote an article titled "State of Kansas and Irish Immigration," which encouraged Irish farmers with no prospects in Ireland to settle in Kansas; in the mid-1870s, Reverend Butler led a group of approximately sixty families from St. Louis to farms in the Irish Creek vicinity. Predominantly dependent on agriculture, the Lillis community was devastated by the economic depression and crop-withering drought of the 1930s.

Historical background and significance:

In 1933, the United States federal government began to reveal the relief programs that would make up the New Deal. The Works Progress Administration, which would ultimately provide employment relief for 8.5 million Americans, was established by executive order in May 1935. The public works program offered partial government funding and low interest loans on twenty-year bonds to communities, school districts, or counties that undertook construction projects. Oretha Ruetti, a noted local historian, wrote that

The gym was a WPA project that began in June 1936 at the Morrisey quarry where WPA workers cut building blocks from limestone ledges. Construction on the 57 x 90 x 20 foot gym with a domed roof began in September 1936. It was erected adjacent to the south side of the Lillis Rural High School, built in 1921...As many as 45 men were employed at one time to work on this WPA project.

The WPA provided exacting specifications for the materials and methods to be used in the construction of the Lillis High School Gymnasium. The exterior walls were required to be composed of "good hard limestone" bedded in a mortar "composed of one part Portland Cement to five parts clean coarse sand and one part hydrated lime or lime putty all measured by volume" and laid in an ashlar pattern. The floors were knot-free 2 ¼" x 13/16" maple strip flooring. The interior walls and the ceilings were finished with a three coat plaster on metal lath. The construction methods used by the WPA and other relief agencies were designed to minimize cost and maximize labor, thus allowing the most money possible to end up in the pockets of the relief workers. The building was finished in the summer of 1938, and had cost \$28,000, of which \$22,000 had been paid by the federal government. The gymnasium was dedicated as a memorial for the twenty-two Cleveland Township men who had served in World War I.

The Lillis High School Gymnasium was one of dozens of relief projects carried out by the WPA, Kansas Emergency Relief Committee (KERC), Public Works Administration (PWA), National

Youth Association (NYA); and Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in Marshall County. These projects included the construction of a high school building, stadium, and swimming pool in Marysville, a vocational agriculture building in Frankfort, a gymnasium/auditorium and city-wide water system in Vermillion, and culverts, bridges, and roads throughout the county. Many residents of Marshall County, which was a predominantly agricultural area, had been hard hit by the drought and record summer temperatures that accompanied the economic depression of the 1930s. These projects provided a measure of financial relief. Charles Carroll, a Lillis High School alumnus, wrote that

Our fathers and grandfathers built [the Lillis High School Gymnasium] as a WPA project during the terrible depression and dust storms of the 1930s. The crops were poor, many livestock starved in the drought ridden pastures and even for those that survived, there was little or no market. Farmers were paid to kill their pigs to establish a market for pork. This building was built with backbreaking hard work. Farmers using their teams of horses and wagons hauled the native limestone. Destitute farmers were eager to work on it. About 20 local farmers participated. They needed a few dollars to feed their families.

Although the Lillis High School Gymnasium exhibits a simple design, the stepped chevron which surmounts the front entrance lends the building a suggestion of Art Deco style. This simple stylization reflects the restrictions and goals of WPA architecture. Because WPA workers were often unskilled in the construction trades, plans had to be simple and relatively easy to carry out. The Art Deco style, with its hallmark geometric patterns and projections, could be simplified without losing all of its modern flair. Therefore, a restrained Art Deco design was often the choice of architects on WPA projects. In addition, the federal government hoped that creating solid, prominent structures would encourage the American people to have faith in the solidity and security of their government. The simple, modern design executed in native stone presented the citizens of Lillis with an image that was both progressive and reliable.

The newly completed Lillis High School Gymnasium was immediately integrated into the life of the school and the community. Girls' and boys' basketball games, school plays, and high school graduations counted among the many activities that took place in the building. The Lillis community also used the gymnasium as a venue for wedding and community dances, donkey basketball games, and as a polling place.

When the Lillis High School closed in 1957, the grade school moved into the building that had been vacated and continued to put the gymnasium to use for school-related and extracurricular activities. In 1970, when the grade school too closed, the gymnasium became the property of Cleveland Township and the frame school building was dismantled. The Lillis High School Gymnasium continued to be a popular site for community activities such as Knights of Columbus dances, concerts by Manhattan's Pork and Bean Band, informal basketball games or roller-skating parties, and the annual St. Patrick's Day banquet. In 1997, Frankfort High School's graduating class held its Senior Sneak camp-out in the gymnasium.

In June 1997, a tornado ripped away the gymnasium's roof. The accompanying hail also damaged many of the windows. Left open to the elements, the wood floors, bleachers, stage, plaster walls, and the two furnaces succumbed to damage inflicted by rain and snow. In the

aftermath of the storm, a group of area residents formed the Lillis Community Center, Inc. to raise money for the restoration of the Lillis High School Gymnasium. Letters written by community members to demonstrate support for the restoration of the building reveal as a recurring theme the feeling that an unusually close and caring community spirit was fostered by the activities held within the gymnasium. A year and a half after the tornado, the group received an Urgent Need Grant from the Community Service Office and was able to replace the roof. This grant, paired with donations of money and materials from private citizens, has enabled the group to replace the damaged windows, pour a new concrete floor, install a water meter and water lines up to the building, rewire the building, and install new lighting. The Lillis Community Center, Inc. hopes to locate funding to install heating, running water, bathrooms, and kitchen facilities in the building.

Bibliography

Daniel, Linda K. Draft nomination, 20 January 2003.

Letters from community members in support of an Urgent Need Grant, 1997.

Marysville Advocate, 3 July 1997.

Works Progress Administration. "Specifications for Labor and Material for An Auditorium-Gymnasium for Rural High School Dist. No. 1, Lillis, Kansas," November 1937.